

June 23, 1998

# The Declaration and Its Heroic Signers

## They Pledged Their Lives, Fortunes, Sacred Honor

*"It ought to be commemorated, as the Day of Deliverance by solemn Acts of Devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires, and Illuminations, from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."*

— John Adams

**Richard Henry Lee's Motion for Independence.** In the summer of 1776, the Second Continental Congress was sitting in the State House in Philadelphia. On June 7, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia rose and put a remarkable proposition before the house which was seconded by John Adams of Massachusetts:

*"Resolved, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved."*

At the time, the war was already a year old; the "shot heard round the world" had been fired at Lexington in April of the preceding year. The colonials had raised an army and were waging war, but it was not a war for independence. They had been waging a loyal struggle for their rights as Englishmen.

Lee's resolution was not met with unanimous enthusiasm. The delegates from Pennsylvania, New York, and South Carolina were especially skeptical. Edward Rutledge of South Carolina wrote that the "sensible part of the house" opposed Lee's resolution, and after four days of debate, he convinced the house that the question should be delayed until July 1.

**Jefferson Drafts a Declaration.** In the intervening days, a committee would be appointed to draw up a formal declaration. Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York were appointed to the committee. The early work fell to Jefferson, then 33 years of age; his contemporaries already had noted his "peculiar felicity" for written expression. John Adams had three reasons for Jefferson to take the lead:

"Reason first — You are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second — I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third — You can write ten times better than I can."

Within about two weeks, Jefferson had completed his rough draft. He showed it to Adams and Franklin who made suggestions which Jefferson accepted. The draft was then shown to the entire committee. More suggestions followed. Later, the draft was submitted to the entire Congress which made even more changes.

**The Continental Congress Votes for Independence.** On July 1, Congress returned to Lee's resolution. Adams stood as "the Atlas of American independence." Jefferson said that Adams "was not graceful nor eloquent, nor remarkably fluent, but he came out occasionally with a power of thought and expression that moved us from our seats." The following day, July 2, 1776, the Second Continental Congress agreed to sever America's ties with the British Crown. The vote was unanimous among the States voting. Two Pennsylvania delegates had stayed away so that Pennsylvania's new majority could vote for independence. Caesar Rodney of Delaware rode 80 miles by day and night through a thunderstorm to break a tie in the Delaware delegation. John Adams thought that future generations would celebrate the Second of July; in the quotation at the top of this paper Adams was speaking of July 2, not July 4.

Congress then turned to the mode of its declaration, and Jefferson's draft was laid before the house. The Continental Congress removed Jefferson's impassioned indictment of the slave trade and made numerous other changes. For example, it removed Jefferson's reference to "Scotch mercenaries" to avoid offending Scots, both in America and across the sea. Jefferson looked favorably on some of the changes but later complained that Congress had committed "depredations" on his original work.

**Self-Evident Truths and Inalienable Rights.** That part of Jefferson's work which has become most famous, the second paragraph, was notably improved by the editing which Congress gave it, and that paragraph now may be immortal. It contains perhaps the most quoted and most beloved sentences in Western political writing. It continues to stir the thoughts of persons around the globe, and in many cases it has stirred more than mere thought. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence begins with these potent words:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. . . ."

The Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Contrary to popular belief, however, the delegates did not sign it on the Fourth. Only the President of Congress, John Hancock of Massachusetts, and the secretary signed it on that day.

**The Declaration is Declared.** After approval, the document was rushed to the printer and broadsides were available to the public the next day. There are, though, differences between the handwritten copy and printed copies. The printer has been accused of following "neither previous copies, nor reason, nor the custom of any age known to man." (The long-standing dispute about whether mankind possesses "*inalienable* rights" or "*unalienable* rights" may be traced to the fevered typesetting in John Dunlap's printing shop on the night of July 4, 1776.)

The printed Declaration was then sent to every part of every State. When read to the people it generally was greeted with celebration, although some one-third of persons in America remained loyal to the King. When a rider delivered the Declaration to the army at New York City on July 9, General Washington had the troops assembled and the Declaration read to them. (Later that night in the same city, a statue of the king was toppled so that the lead in the statue could be melted down for bullets.) Abigail Adams first heard the Declaration in Boston on July 18. By the end of the month, a child in East Windsor, Connecticut was christened "Independence." It took another couple of weeks before the Declaration found its way into the remote parts of Georgia.

**Does the Declaration Still Deserve Reverence?** In some places today, and among some of our more fashionable thinkers, the Declaration of Independence is not received with the same enthusiasm that greeted it in 1776. Its critics believe that the Declaration was not meant for the many, but the few; that it was meant for propertied white men but not for others. Abraham Lincoln taught that such criticism is terribly wrong.

At Gettysburg Cemetery in the fall of 1863, Lincoln said that our forefathers had, in 1776, brought forth "a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Four years before Gettysburg, Lincoln had written:

"[A]nd he who would *be* no slave, must consent to *have* no slave. Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, cannot long retain it. All honor to Jefferson — to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression."

Lincoln made many similar statements in 1858 during his famous debates with Senator Stephen A. Douglas. Abraham Lincoln did not believe that the Declaration of Independence was a narrow document, but universal and for the ages.

**The Declaration's Signers Risked Hanging.** After the Second Continental Congress approved the Declaration, they laid it aside temporarily. It was not until July 19, after the Congress had received notice of New York's approval, that Congress ordered the Declaration to be engrossed. It could now be titled, "The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America."

Most of the delegates signed the Declaration on August 2, 1776. Eventually, 56 patriots signed. John Hancock's signature is large and celebrated; legend has it that he made it bold enough for the king to read without his glasses.

On the day of the signing, August 2, 1776, General Washington had 10,000 men under his command. Off the coast, more than 130 British ships sat at anchor. The Signers had already received word that those ships contained 42,000 sailors and soldiers who were awaiting an order to join the forces already ashore. They represented the most powerful nation on Earth, and their task was to crush the rebellion and arrest the leading traitors. Every man who put his pen to the Declaration knew that he faced the wrath of the king and his ministers. Traitors were hanged.

There may have been some gallows humor in Congress on August 2. Legend has it that John Hancock said, "Gentlemen, we must be unanimous; there must be no pulling different ways; we must all hang together."

Franklin, ever the wit, replied, "Yes, we must indeed all hang together or most assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Another story has the portly Benjamin Harrison of Virginia joking with the slender Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts about the different ways in which they might "dance on air" if British troops strung them up. Harrison supposed that he would die quickly but that Gerry's lack of heft would leave him kicking for half an hour.

**The Signers Pledged Their Lives, Their Fortunes, and Their Sacred Honor.** We have quoted part of the magnificent second paragraph, but the last sentence of the Declaration is frequently neglected, especially, perhaps, by today's readers. We may be sure, however, that the Signers did not neglect those final, sobering words that fell under their gaze as they bent over the parchment to sign their names:

"And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

**What Was Risked?** With their solemn pledge, what did the Signers put at risk?

**Literally, they risked their lives, and they were young men.**† Three were in their twenties, and 18 were in their thirties. Only Franklin was an old man. Unless hung or shot, most Signers could expect to live many more years.

**Literally, they risked their fortunes, and many of the Signers were men of property.** Eleven Signers were prosperous merchants and one owned the largest mercantile house in America. Nine were large landowners. Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, the great agitator for independence, was of modest means, but many of the other Signers risked substantial personal fortunes.

Twenty-four of the Signers were lawyers or jurists. They were doctors of medicine, career politicians, merchants, and a minister. They knew that if the Americans lost this struggle they would never again practice their professions.

**Literally, the Signers risked their honor.** Treason is not an honorable calling. Additionally, the Signers risked the honor and safety of their families. All but two had wives and children at home, including infant children. Almost all of these families were exposed to British action at some time during the war and, as the Signers knew, American women were not spared the particular horrors that can be visited upon women by foreign warriors.

**What Price Was Paid?** And, when the war had ended and their pledge had been redeemed, what price had the Signers paid?

**They pledged their lives, and nine Signers died of wounds or hardships during the war.** Another five were captured or imprisoned, and some of them were treated brutally.

The wives and children of others were killed, jailed, mistreated, persecuted, or left penniless. The British drove one Signer from his wife's deathbed, and he lost all of his children.

Two of Abraham Clark's sons (Clark was from New Jersey) were captured by the British and imprisoned in a floating hell hole. So many American prisoners died on that ship and in the warehouses of New York City that the shores of Long Island Sound were reported to be "white with human bones" of the dead who had been pitched into the river. Because their father was a Signer, the Clarks were selected for especially brutal treatment. Thomas Clark, a captain of artillery, was put in solitary confinement and starved. He managed to stay alive only because other prisoners pushed bread to him through his key hole.

The British told Abraham Clark of his boys' fate, and they offered to release his boys if Clark deserted the patriots' cause. He refused. Further, he did not bring the matter to the attention of the Congress where he sat, and he asked for no special consideration from the military.

When news of Captain Clark's treatment eventually reached Congress, Congress ordered General Washington to take a British captain from an aristocratic family, throw him in a hole, and starve him to death. When Washington informed the British of the order that he had received from Congress, General Sir William Howe ordered that the persecution of the Clark brothers promptly cease. Thereafter, both sides improved conditions for their prisoners.

Abraham Clark refused to revoke his solemn pledge in order to save his own sons. When he died in 1794 no monument was raised, but the following epitaph appears on his gravestone: *He loved his Country / And Adhered to her Cause / In the Darkest Hours of her Struggles / Against Oppression.*

**The Signers pledged their fortunes, and the houses of twelve Signers were burned to the ground.** At Yorktown, American artillery men purposely spared Thomas Nelson's house until he gave a direct order that the house be fired upon. The first round sent a ball completely through the house killing British officers. Eventually, the house was destroyed by cannon fire.

**Seventeen Signers lost everything they owned.**

**They pledged their sacred honor,** and every Signer was condemned as a traitor and hunted. Most were driven into flight and often barred from their families or homes. They were offered immunity, freedom, rewards, their property, or their lives and the release of their loved ones if they would break their pledge or take the King's protection. **But, not one Signer defected or changed his stand, even in the darkest hours of the war.†**

**The Pledge that Won a War for Independence.** The Glorious Fourth is a day to reflect upon the Declaration of Independence. Its second paragraph will justly be remarked upon at thousands of sites, but let us never forget the noble pledge in its last sentence: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

It was that honored pledge that brought the Declaration itself and the American Nation through the blood and sorrow and destruction of the War for Independence.

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Two sources were used primarily: Dumas Malone, *THE STORY OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* (1954) and T.R. Fehrenbach, *GREATNESS TO SPARE: THE HEROIC SACRIFICES OF THE MEN WHO SIGNED THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* (1968). Information on the Signers' "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" which appears in the text between the daggers (†) was taken particularly from the Fehrenbach book, pages 9-10, 84 & 88 [Clark], 232 [Nelson], & 247; in some cases we have used, not just Mr. Fehrenbach's information but his very words. However, we did not put those words into quotation marks because doing so created some confusion about who was being quoted. ***For this reason, please do not omit this source note if this paper is downloaded or copied.*** (Additional (and, in some cases, different) information on the Signers can be found in David C. Whitney, *FOUNDERS OF FREEDOM IN AMERICA: LIVES OF THE MEN WHO SIGNED THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE* (1964) and Lynn Montross, *THE RELUCTANT REBELS* (1950).) The quotation from Abraham Lincoln is from his letter to Henry Pierce of April 6, 1859. We found the letter in a most interesting book, Thomas G. West, *VINDICATING THE FOUNDERS: RACE, SEX, CLASS AND JUSTICE IN THE ORIGINS OF AMERICA* 175 (1997).